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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses federal requirements for addressing general education curriculum standards and student participation in educational assessments in the Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) of students with disabilities. Specific regulations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act are cited, and the following recommendations are offered for addressing standards and assessment on IEPs: (1) whenever access to the general curriculum is mentioned on an IEP, there should also be mention of access to the educational standards that apply to all children; (2) develop participation decision-making processes of IEP teams, and reflect these on the IEP form; (3) include "alternate assessment" on the list of assessment participation options; (4) specify important implications of assessment decisions on the IEP form; (5) post state IEP forms in easily accessible locations on state education agency Web sites; (6) offer statewide training, ongoing technical assistance, and easily accessible information about standards-based IEPs and assessment options; (7) clearly label IEP forms as sample, recommended, or required so that districts know their parameters in making alterations to the form; and (8) give IEP teams the time to make thoughtful decisions. (CR)

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NCEO POLICY DIRECTIONS

NATIONAL CENTER ON EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING STANDARDS AND ASSESSMENTS ON STATE AND DISTRICT IEP FORMS

By

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NUMBER 12, MARCH 2001

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Number 12 March 2001

Recommendations for Addressing Standards and Assessments on State and District IEP Forms

Background

Teams of parents, students, general and special educators, administrators, and others have been required to document special education services through Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) for over 25 years. When IEPs were first required, both preservice and inservice training focused on compliance with the new law (PL 94-142) as special educators struggled to figure out what IEPs were and how to write them.

Now, over 25 years later, IEP teams are required to "raise the bar" for students with disabilities, to focus on helping students learn to high standards, and to be accountable for what they are actually learning as a result of their "special" programs and services.

In this era of standards-based reform, the emphasis on setting high standards for all students presents a significant challenge for IEP teams that were previously engaged in developing parallel programs or separate educational services for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities today are expected to work toward the same rigorous standards as their peers, with support from special education and related services.

IEPs need to reflect goals and services that support students with disabilities in their learning toward high educational standards. Unfortunately, there is a lack of clarity about how IEPs fit with these new standards and confusion about how to consider standards when making educational decisions for students with disabilities. This disconnect limits the usefulness of many current IEPs (McDonnell, McLaughlin, & Morison, 1997).

IEPs Before IDEA 97

Numerous researchers have identified inadequacies in IEPs developed before IDEA 97 as well as passive compliance with federal and state requirements. While IEP goals should have been related to instruction and support in general education settings for those students who spent most of the school day in these settings, IEP goals were found to be broad, inconsistent with each other, and not related to what was happening in the classroom (for example, "Peter will improve communication skills"). Few special educators believed that the general education curriculum should be the primary curriculum for students with disabilities, essentially resulting in a non-existent curriculum base for these students.

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IEPs Since IDEA 97

Despite problems identified prior to 1997, the assumption among framers of IDEA 97 was that IEPs provide a good structure within which to set high standards and measure student outcomes. Recent guidance from the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (July, 2000) highlights the IEP process as "one of the most critical elements to ensure effective teaching, learning, and better results for all children with disabilities" (p. 2).

Focusing on standards should shed new light on the entire planning process engaged in by IEP teams. Rather than focus on deficits, IEP teams now have an opportunity to focus on helping students work toward high educational standards. The questions that can now be asked are: "What standard is the student working toward? How far along is the student now? What can we do to help the student move closer to meeting the standard?" And, for students preparing for the important transition from school to adult life, we can ask, "How will this standard help this student prepare for a successful transition from school to adult life?"

While IDEA prescribes the information that must be included in IEPs, there is no single form or approach that is required. States can design their own IEP forms, and in some states, the IEP format is designed within school districts. A recent study by the National Center on Educational Outcomes found that only a handful of states mention educational standards on their IEP forms. Thirty states list at least three options for participation in the assessment system—standard participation, accommodated participation, and alternate assessment participation (see Table 1).

Recommendations

Much could be done to increase the usefulness of the IEP as a tool to document special education services that assist the student in learning to high educational standards. Recommendations toward this end should focus on inserting standards into the IEP, clarifying assessment options on

Table 1. Status of Standards and Assessments on State IEP Forms

Status Variable	Number of States
IEP Form Availability	
On state education department Web site	34
From state personnel, not found on Web site	7
No state IEP form	6
Form in revision	3
Standards and the General Curriculum	
Standards addressed on form	5
General curriculum addressed on PLEP* and Goals	13
General curriculum addressed on PLEP or Goals	18
No standards or general curriculum addressed	5
Assessment Participation Options	
Participation options include accommodations and alternate assessment	30
Participation options do not include alternate assessment	8
Participation options do not include accommodations	2
No participation options addressed	1

* PLEP = Present Level of Educational Performance

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the IEP, and rethinking the format and use of IEPs (see Table 2).

▶ Whenever access to the general curriculum is mentioned on an IEP, there should also be mention of access to the educational standards that apply to all children.

Since IDEA and Title I both require all students to learn to high standards, it is important for IEPs to reflect this requirement (see IDEA regulations in Table 3). Beyond this, it is critical for special education services to actually help students work toward high standards. While IDEA 97 does not specifically identify standards under "Content of the IEP," the final regulations indicate that the purpose of special education is "to ensure access of the child to the general curriculum, so that he or she can meet the educational standards within the jurisdiction of the public agency that apply to all children." It is not appropriate to simply assume that if students have access to the general curriculum they will be working toward standards.

Another reason to mention high standards on the IEP is that there seems to be a belief that high standards do not apply to students with disabilities—that these students should be working toward their own personal goals with an individualized curriculum that is not connected to general education's high standards. This is not true, and needs to be clarified right on the IEP form.

▶ Develop participation decision-making processes for IEP teams, and reflect these on the IEP form.

IEP teams need a process that drives their planning and decision-making. Attempts to streamline IEP forms so that they include only the specific requirements of the law may actually increase paperwork by making it necessary to have additional written forms and instructions that explain the process. IEP meetings that simply engage people in checking boxes on a streamlined compliance document may not result in plans that truly enable students to work toward standards, or allow teams to make good decisions about participation in state and district assessments.

This process does not need to add pages to the form. For example, an assessment decision-making process could simply guide a team through the process of responding to a few questions, such as: "Can the student show what he or she knows on a general assessment, using the accommodations he or she uses in the classroom? If yes, the student should participate in the general assessment with a careful plan for the use of accommodations. If no, consider alternate assessment participation for the student."

▶ Include "alternate assessment" on the list of assessment participation options.

Most state and district assessment systems now have three options for the participation of students

Table 2. Recommendations for Addressing Standards and Assessments on IEPs

1. Whenever access to the general curriculum is mentioned on an IEP, there should also be mention of access to the educational standards that apply to all children.
2. Develop participation decision-making processes for IEP teams, and reflect these on the IEP form.
3. Include "alternate assessment" on the list of assessment participation options.
4. Specify important implications of assessment decisions on the IEP form.
5. Post state IEP forms in easily accessible locations on state education agency Web sites.
6. Offer statewide training, ongoing technical assistance, and easily accessible information about standards-based IEPs and assessment options.
7. Clearly label IEP forms as sample, recommended, or required so that districts know their parameters in making alterations to the form.
8. Give IEP teams time to make thoughtful decisions.

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with disabilities—standard assessment, assessment with accommodations, and alternate assessment. Alternate assessments are administered to students who are unable to participate in general assessments even with accommodations. Because alternate assessments have only been required since July 1, 2000, it is critical that all IEP team members are aware of their existence.

Several states identify specific alternate assessments on their IEP form. For example, "The student will participate in MAP-A" is a participation option on Missouri's IEP form. Some state forms also include a note about where additional information and assessment procedures may be obtained.

▶ **Specify important implications of assessment decisions on the IEP form.** IEP team members need to be aware of the implications of assessment decisions. For example, students who participate in alternate assessments may not have access to a general diploma. Another example is that, in some states, the scores of assessments that have been modified may not be reported or included in accountability indices. Placing these implications on the IEP form will ensure that decision makers are aware of them as they make decisions.

▶ **Post state IEP forms in easily accessible locations on state education agency Web sites.** Thirty-four states post their IEP forms on their state agency Web sites. These forms are not always easy to find, however. Searching through a state agency's Web site takes precious time and may feel like searching for a needle in a haystack. Some states only post their IEP forms, while others embed the forms within lengthy instruction manuals.

The goal of posting IEP forms online (at both local and state levels) should be to increase their availability to all IEP team members, including parents. States and local schools should check to see how

Table 3. IDEA 97 Regulations: IEP Content on Assessment and the General Curriculum

Final Regulations for the Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Public Law 105-17 (1999)

"The IEP for each child with a disability must include a statement of:

- the child's present levels of educational performance, including how the child's disability affects the child's involvement and progress in the general curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled children)
- measurable annual goals, including benchmarks or short-term objectives, related to meeting the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and progress in the general curriculum (i.e., the same curriculum as for nondisabled children), and meeting each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability." (300.347(a)(1)(2))

"The IEP for each child with a disability must include a statement of:

Any individual modifications in the administration of State or district-wide assessments of student achievement that are needed in order for the child to participate in the assessment; and

(ii) If the IEP team determines that the child will not participate in a particular State or district-wide assessment of student achievement (or part of an assessment) a statement of

(A) Why that assessment is not appropriate for the child; and

(B) How the child will be assessed. (300.347(a)(1)(2))

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easy it is for teachers and parents to find IEP forms, beginning their search at the agency's homepage.

▷ Offer statewide training, ongoing technical assistance, and easily accessible information about standards-based IEPs and assessment options.

Some states have worked extensively with stakeholders at state and local levels to align instructional goals for students with disabilities with state and district standards and assessments. These stakeholders, however, cannot be the only people who understand and support this process. All IEP teams need to have access to ongoing training and technical assistance.

State departments of education can provide written materials and introductory workshops, and make connections to standards (e.g., one state links its on-line IEP form to the state standards, allowing IEP teams to have easy access to the state standards for all students), but day-to-day support needs to be built into a district's comprehensive system of professional development. And, any time an IEP form does not align goals to standards, it is up to each district to make this link through information and training.

▷ Clearly label IEP forms as sample, recommended, or required so that districts know their parameters in making alterations to the form.

Nearly every state has a sample, recommended, or required IEP form, or is in the process of developing one. How "required" districts are to use state forms, however, varies across states from "This is a sample to use as you desire," to "Our monitoring team likes unified forms, so we recommend you use this one," to "This form is recommended, but you need permission to change it," to "This form is required by state law or rule." Often, even though use of a particular form is not "required" by state law or rule, districts are "strongly" encouraged to use the state-designed form for ease of monitoring and compliance to state and federal requirements.

Only in a very small number of states is the IEP form clearly marked as "required," "recommended," or "sample." In most states, this information is not available, even from state agency personnel. A decision about how required a form is needs to be made at the state level and then clearly communicated to districts. Since state forms may only include information required for minimum compliance to state and federal laws, districts may want to add information to help IEP teams develop useful plans with students.

▶ Give IEP teams time to make thoughtful decisions.

Good decision-making tools are useless without time to think through decisions. IEP teams must have plenty of time to meet, develop an agenda, and then, with a good facilitator to increase efficiency, make informed and thoughtful decisions that will guide a student's special education services. Since parents and students are essential members of these teams, they also need the IEP form to serve as a tool that promotes understanding and good decision making. Simply making IEP team meetings and forms shorter will not solve the host of additional issues that need to be dealt with, including large caseloads, adequate time to involve parents, union rules about meeting outside school hours, and class coverage if meetings are held during the school day. These are tough issues that also need to be addressed.

▶ Summary

IEP forms are tools used to document educational programs for students with disabilities. States have streamlined IEP forms in an attempt to reduce paperwork, shorten IEP meetings, provide uniformity, and ensure compliance with the letter of the law. Streamlining IEP forms may ensure compliance, but does not provide IEP teams with the support needed to make well-informed decisions. In order to document and address standards and assessment decisions thoughtfully, attention must be paid to the ways that IEP forms lead teams through the decision-making process and ensure that all students with disabilities can participate in assessment systems that allows them to demonstrate what they know and can do.

Increasing student achievement and success is what IDEA is all about, and the IEP can be a valuable tool for documenting our efforts. With this in mind, the development of an IEP form that meets the intent of state and federal laws and guides IEP teams in their planning for students is critical. Yes, IEP development

needs to be an efficient process, but the efficiency is lost if the process and documentation do not result in a plan that supports students in their work toward high educational standards.

Resources

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About NCEO

The National Center on Educational Outcomes (NCEO) was established in 1990 to provide national leadership in the identification of outcomes and indicators to monitor educational results for all students, including students with disabilities. NCEO addresses the participation of students with disabilities in national and state assessments, standards-setting efforts, and graduation requirements.

The Center represents a collaborative effort of the University of Minnesota, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE).

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NCEO *Policy Directions* is a series of reports that address national policy issues related to students with disabilities. This report was prepared by Sandra Thompson, Martha Thurlow, and Patti Whetstone. It is available in alternative formats upon request.

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